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Re-Defining Leadership for a New Year

Maybe it's the new clothes, or maybe it's the smell of kreplach soup or apples and honey, but the coming of Rosh Hashanah always sends me on a trip back in time to my childhood, to the celebrations of Rosh Hashanah with my family in Omaha.

Those memories are sweet like honey, even outweighing the tart, freshly-picked apple kick that accompanies the sadness of recalling loved ones now gone. Something about Rosh Hashanah always returns me to my roots, to the soulful joy of time with family and friends and faith. As Rosh Hashanah nears, my mind fills with pictures of great-aunts and great-uncles, second and third cousins, grandparents, and all of those who by will or by accident helped me become the person I am today.

When I was contemplating a career in the rabbinate, I remember having some interesting conversations with my maternal grandparents, with whom I was very close. We spent lots of time together, and outside of my parents and siblings, no one knew me better than my grandmother and grandfather.

I was lucky—my grandparents lived just about six miles from us, and nary a week went by between visits. I still feel their influence in my life nearly every day.

So as I was thinking about becoming a rabbi, both my grandmother and my grandfather wanted to know about my motivations. They were both proud of me—and both did everything they could to help me achieve all that I dreamed. But they both wanted to know why their Danny Boy was interested in becoming a Rabbi. They each approached the conversation on their own, in their own ways.

The conversation with my grandmother was an in-depth, intellectual discussion. Though she never earned a college degree, my grandmother was extraordinarily well-read. She had a quick mind, a mind like a sponge, and she soaked up everything she could.

She wanted to know what drew me to the rabbinate, what made me certain that I needed to be a rabbi. She asked if I knew what the life of a rabbi was like, if I was really ready to have a congregation and a board full of bosses controlling my life, if I was ready to live such a life of commitment.

To each of her questions, I answered in the affirmative. The discussion continued, with both of us talking about the highs and lows of a public life and all that the rabbinate would mean for me and my family. I had the clear sense that she thought the rabbinate was a high and noble calling, but she never quite seemed certain that it was the right job for a nice Jewish boy!

The conversation with my grandfather was much shorter. He was not a talkative man, but no one could top him when it came to friendliness or sweetness. I loved spending the day with him at his car lot, and on Saturdays in the fall, he would come to our house in the morning, dressed in ten shades of red, and together we drove the 45 miles to Lincoln to watch Nebraska football games.

When it came time to talk about my desire to be a Rabbi, he asked me just one question. He looked me in the eye and said something like, “Are you sure you really want to spend that much time in the Synagogue?!” I smiled, said yes, and he seemed satisfied.

Both of them touched on important issues. On the one hand, it is important for a rabbi to have a sense of belief and practice and purpose. And it is important to understand the potential pitfalls of living the life of a religious leader.

And on the other hand, services never rank on the top ten lists of favorite hobbies, and certainly no one loves sitting in the sanctuary for hours on end. Making sense of this dichotomy came clearly to me last winter at our annual sixth grade retreat at Camp Harlam, when someone asked me about my favorite Jewish holiday and/or my favorite service.

The answer to the holiday question came easily, but it took me time to think through the services. Holidays are fun—and I can still think of nothing I enjoy more than the long lazy dinner filled with lively discussion that is the Passover Seder.

But services are different. Shabbat has an eternal beauty, and each holiday brings with it wonderful prayers and melodies. After some more contemplation, I realized that my favorite service was one that comes regularly, but is often skipped. It is a service that marks changes in time as well as the identity of the Jew. In Havdalah, the service marking the end of Shabbat, I recognized not just my favorite service, but once again, the influence of my grandparents.

Havdalah is rich in meaning and symbolism, filled with images of the world to come, of faith and ritual. It is at once, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual. Havdalah is sweetness and hope. And it also happens to be just about the shortest service of all.

Havdalah marks a separation in time. At that moment, as Shabbat ends, we bid adieu to a day of rest and dreaming, and return to our lives of work and learning. Havdalah separates the sacred from the mundane, the special from the regular.

In Havdalah we see a reflection of ourselves as Jews—separate from the rest of the world, trying to lead lives of value and valor and virtue. Yet, at that brief crossroads, we also see that we must be a part of the regular world, working with our friends and neighbors to continue the sacred work of creation. At that moment of separation at the end of each Shabbat, we are called to be leaders and co-workers at the same time.

Havdalah reminds us of the possibility of a lifetime of Shabbatot—where each day is one of family and peace. As we smell the spices and watch the flames, we hear the ancient call to lead—to build a future where every day is Shabbat. And Havdalah pushes

us out, into the world, into the everyday lives we lead, always aiming for that next Shabbat.

Tonight, as we mark the beginning of the New Year, I want to spend some time looking at the call to leadership we receive each week at Havdalah, the call we encounter in full force as we find ourselves together welcoming a new year.

Let us examine the call to lead, a call shared by each of us, by exploring three key principles: Giving, Growing, and Community. If we are to lead, we must be willing to give of ourselves, our time, and our energy. This call to lead comes to each of us with requirements. To be effective leaders, we must continually change and grow. And finally, if we are truly to lead, we must arrive at the understanding that leadership is not an individual activity but rather leadership is a team sport, requiring participation and cooperation from all.

Let us begin with the notion that leadership involves giving. I believe that the strongest, most effective, most successful leaders have always been and will continue to be those who find new and creative ways to provide for others. Further, the need to reach out, and the skill of being able to conjure new gifts, belongs not to a small class of leaders but rather to all of us. We each have the ability to lead—whether in our communities, in our workplaces, our families, or anywhere else—and our ability to do for others represents the source of that leadership.

The giving required to lead need not necessitate deep pockets or even hours of spare time. Rather, the giving required to lead calls for one simple ingredient—the ability to see that none of us exists alone. We are all interconnected. Giving allows us to discover the selflessness which resides in all of our souls. Giving allows us to discover the joy of comforting another, helping another, making another smile. Giving allows us to recognize the links between our internal selves and our external selves.

One of my teachers, Dr. Ron Wolfson, explores this very concept in a book newly published. The book, called God's To-Do List, speaks of ways that we can work as God's partner to do for others. Ronnie suggests that each of us has a unique to-do list that will allow us to work with God to make our world better.

The tasks on each of our lists are unique, yet they all share the same goal of helping us realize our abilities to partner with God in the continuing creation of our world. Rosh Hashanah gives us the opportunity to explore our own to-do lists, and figure out ways we can help others.

Some of us may decide to give by comforting those who are bent low by sorrow, some by calling those who are home-bound or lonely, some by nurturing those who are new to our community, some by creating beautiful works of art, literature, or music, some by celebrating with those who reach milestones great or small, some by blessing children, grandchildren, friends and neighbors, some by repairing through acts of Tzedek, justice, some by caring for those in need of special attention, some by exploring traditions and texts, and all of us by engaging in acts of forgiveness during these Yamim Noraim. Each of us has gifts to give, each of us has infinite potential to connect with others and lead the efforts of perfecting our world.

Giving opens us to the possibilities of leadership and partnership. Once those gates have swung wide, we need to insure that we will be able to grow and learn more. Growing provides an endless supply of nutrients and fertilizer so that the tree of life can continue to flourish. Growing requires risk, growing offers rich rewards.

The year 5768 which we welcome tonight will witness the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel. Over those three score years, Israel has grown into a robust and modern state, built on two goals: survival and growth. Both issues have dominated every facet of Israeli life over 60 years. While we hope that the next six decades will bring about fewer worries concerning survival, Israel's focus on growth has much to teach us.

From its earliest days, Israel allocated energy and resources to the development of our ancient Promised Land. From exploring innovative technological advances to creating clever means for making the desert bloom, Israel as a nation has never stopped growing. Now a firm part of the Israeli psyche, growth, for the typical Israeli citizen has become a way of life.

Time and again Israel has pushed the boundaries of the possible in the name of growth. From welcoming refugees from all parts of the world to a small nation with resources already stretched to reaching out to help other nations facing crisis, Israel teaches us the importance of emphasizing growth.

Alan Dershowitz, the Harvard professor and vocal supporter of Israel recognizes the significance of Israel's emphasis on growth. He has noted that in many ways, Israel has become the Jew of the world, the one charged with being an *Or L'Goyim*, a light to the other nations. While other nations stumble, Israel must maintain a higher standard, always exemplifying the best of human possibility.

We too are Israel, even if we are not Israelis. We are a people committed to growth, to reaching out to others. We can adopt in our own lives and in our own community the same commitment to growth.

We can come to this place, and take part in classes, lectures, activities. We will find, as Israel found, that growth requires risk. We may face a room full of new people, or a lively discussion among vocal people. But like Israel, growth calls us. While Israel is not yet as safe and secure as any of us would hope, she has found that growth can provide an enhanced level of safety and security. We can find that our own growth can lead us to enriched lives, to intellectual and spiritual fulfillment.

Having established the importance of giving and growing, and their abilities to link us to each other and thrive, let us turn to the role of community in leadership. I believe that leadership is a team sport, not an individual activity. Successful leadership brings groups of people together, highlighting shared commitments and developing new connections. Leaders are those who can think, not just speak, in the royal 'we.'

Our central prayers of Teshuvah during these Holy Days illustrate the importance of community. In the *Ashamnu* prayer, during which we confess our shortcomings during the past year, we pray not in the first-person singular, I have done X or Y or Z, but rather in the first-person plural: We have done X, We have done Y, We have done Z. We who

offer these sacred words of remorse know that we are all responsible for each other, that we achieve or miss the mark as a people, not just as individuals.

Right now, our country finds itself mired in debate and discord concerning the very same issue. The debate represents health, for open discussions and disagreements form one of the essential elements for any democracy. But the discord today centers around a significant problem. For more than six years now, our government has pursued a policy of unilateralism, acting on our own without the support of the rest of the world.

Through indifference, ignorance or acquiescence, we Americans have forgotten the lesson of the High Holy Days. We have allowed ourselves to function on our own, and now the time has come for us to seek Teshuvah for our actions, and instead turn toward a course of multi-lateralism, partnership with our co-inhabitants on earth. We must do all that we can to encourage our leaders to reach out, to find partners for peace and prosperity, and in places where no partners exist, we must sow seeds so that future generations will not face the same struggles.

A necessary ingredient in building shared leadership, trust seems especially lacking in our world today. We have created a world in which we look with suspicion rather than with optimism. We see others as threats and potential enemies instead of seeing others as possible partners and friends.

The road toward togetherness begins with us tonight. While we recall our own successes and failures during the last year, let us also recognize the majesty of sharing this time with each other. While we seek forgiveness for ourselves, let us also seek healing and reconciliation on a grander level. While we allow ourselves to travel back in time, to events of the past year or even holidays long past, let us also join together to journey b'yachad, hand in hand, in the coming year.

Each week as we mark the end of Shabbat with Havdalah, we summon the presence of Eliyahu haNavi, Elijah the prophet. In the presence of Elijah we savor the last moments of a day of peace and dream of lifetimes of peace. This evening, as we mark the end of one year and the beginning of another, let us again turn to Elijah, and let us see in our sage a partner leading us to the life for which we all pray.